

## Dreaming of an anti-empire: Ivan Efremov's quest for a "third path"

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### Abstract

© 2017, Ab Imperio. All rights reserved. The article discusses the literary works of Ivan Antonovich Efremov (1908-1972) as a manifestation of a particular worldview: the "third path" between the Stalinist version of Communism and European Liberalism, a postimperial yet not postcolonial utopian vision of the single and embracing egalitarian society of the future. A renowned paleontologist, Efremov is best known as a leading Soviet science fiction writer, author of the utopian novel *The Andromeda Nebula* (1957), the anti-utopian *The Hour of the Bull* (1968), as well as a number of historical novels. The author argues that these texts contain a hidden transcript of Efremov's sociopolitical views, which are virtually impossible to detect in his personal papers. He destroyed most of his archive in the 1930s out of the fear of arrest, and heavily censored his personal correspondence thereafter. As a result, Efremov's fiction remains the only elaborated authentic form of expression of his ideas. The author argues that these ideas had been formed in the 1920s and reflected the ambivalent intellectual climate of the epoch, in which mysticism coexisted with revolutionary utopianism and anti-Semitism with internationalism. Efremov's sociophilosophical views were equally contradictory, reflecting influences of social utopianism and eugenics, mystical anarchism and theosophy, scientism and Buddhism. His egalitarian-utopian ideal, bizarrely united with Nietzscheanism, gave birth to a peculiar dream of "anti-empire," a community of intellectually, morally, and physically exceptional superhumans, eager to help weaker individuals and communities to rise to their level. Such an ideal was formed during the Thaw as an antithesis to Stalinism. By the mid-1960s, it became clear that this ideal could not be articulated by means of any of the main ideological currents in the Soviet society, while at the same time it shared elements with all of them. Efremov's holism and contempt for individual or group autonomy as well as for consumerism resonated with Stalinism and Soviet statism, Russian nationalism and anti-Semitism. At the same time, his strong condemnation of state coercion, censorship of sexuality, and individualism brought him closer to liberals. The result was Efremov's complicated relations with all the main Soviet "parties" of the 1960s, and his growing rapprochement (partly for pragmatic reasons) with some of the leaders of the emerging "Russian party." These political ties heavily affected attitudes toward Efremov's literary works after his death, as rightist politicians and publicists began claiming the legacy of this unconventional communist thinker.

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